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THE STATE

Clear, Concise and From the State

◆Bureaucracy: The governor is giving awards to offices that publish brochures and other material that people can actually read.

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The category was Excellence in External Public Information Documents.

And last week, the Governor's Office for Innovation in Government ended 10 days of suspense, announcing that a fire-prevention brochure and a series of teenage-themed job safety bookmarks had won the state's inaugural Clarity Awards.

The phrase "clarity in government" seems to come with an implied rim shot, as much an internal contradiction as jumbo shrimp. "There's a whole theory that bureaucracy remains deliberately obscure to maintain its power," said Kevin Starr, the state librarian and a contest judge.

The Clarity Awards are part of Gov. Gray Davis' efforts to rip away that veil, following in the footsteps of a similar federal initiative to "reinvent" government.

Clarity winners get no cash, only bragging rights and crystal trophies made by inmates in the state's Arts-in-Corrections program.

The first contest evaluated brochures, surveys and other educational materials. In the future, the program will expand, giving quarterly awards for the clearest forms, regulations and even internal communiques.

"That should be a kick," said Janet Koffman, a Department of Industrial Relations information officer whose apprenticeship posters placed second in the first Clarities. She routinely receives internal documents so riddled with obscure legal citations and acronyms that she can barely understand them.

The standards for the contest are simple and constant: Be concise. Avoid acronyms, technical terms and cliches. Use vertical lists. (If only the designers of the butterfly ballot in Palm Beach County, Fla., had known that.)

"It should be something that my mother, who's 92, could pick up and read," said Mary Fernandez, the innovation office's deputy director and another contest judge.

Admittedly, thick subject matter puts some publications at a disadvantage. It's tough to find vivid verbs to explain environmental health risk assessments or teacher-retention tax credits.

"And verbs are the most powerful thing. Stay away from ponderous abstract nouns," Starr instructed, adding that only his role as a judge kept the State Library's own publications from being "a slam-dunk winner."

The Department of Forestry and Fire Protection brochure "Homeowners Checklist: How to Make Your Home Fire Safe" won over the judging panel with crisp graphics, organization and thoroughness. It replaced a 10-year-old brochure weighted down with phrases such as "adjacent to the home" and comprehension-proof jargon like "fire flow" and "Class-A roof."

"The standard public does not understand that," said Bryan Zollner, a firefighter-turned-bureaucrat who has not quite banished government-speak from his own vocabulary.

"The next element we're working on is remaking that," he said of a fire-safety video that will complement the updated brochure. Together, he said, they'll make an "effective, defensible system."

The co-winner from the Department of Industrial Relations, the "Safe Jobs for Youth" book-mark series, featured a suitably informal tone in addressing questions that teenagers might have about wages, hours and permits.

"High school students don't want to read the labor code," said Carrie Beckstein, the author of the campaign.

She sympathizes. Persuading her agency colleagues to let go of their convoluted syntax and jargon is "a constant--I want to pick my words here--I need another word for battle."

Starr's brush with clarity left him so inspired that he could imagine a time when even California's environmental impact reports and financial records would become penetrable to the citizenry.

Maybe, as poet George Oppen wrote, clarity really is "the most beautiful thing in the world."